Evangelical Preaching

by

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Evangelical Preaching

WALTON HARLOWE GREEVER, D.D.

This address was delivered at the Monday morning conference session of the local pastors, guest preachers, Seminary faculty and students (about 200 in the group) in connection with "EVANGELISM WEEK" in the Columbia, S. C., area, and, in response to the unanimous request of that group, is published for free distribution by the generous contribution of a loyal friend of the Cause.

Dear Brethren in the Christian Faith and in the Ministry of the Gospel:

I have accepted the invitation for this service with a good deal of hesitation. First, on account of the importance of the subject, and second, because I keenly feel inadequate for its proper discussion.

It is recorded that, a long time ago, Lord Bacon said: "Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man." I had to look for this quotation in a "Cyclopedia of Familiar Quotations." Thus I wish to guard against the false impression that I have erudite knowledge and memory which I do not possess—a matter that many public speakers, including some preachers, are not too particular about. In spite of the great mass of reading matter in books, periodicals, etc., with which we are blessed, or sometimes plagued, I am far from being a "full" man; and after innumerable conferences I am not "ready" in anything; but I do have the highest appreciation of careful use of terms in writing, for the sake of accuracy and clarity, in thought and communication. That does not mean a petty quibble, with hair-splitting distinctions on unimportant subjects, but utmost care for the clear and unequivocal statements of convictions, with reasons, pertaining to any important subject. It may be that indefinite terminology is responsible for many assumed differences in doctrine, by which the organized church is divided, especially where true theology, as the right interpretation of God's revelation, is lightly esteemed.

In the statement of the subject for present consideration a choice was given between two qualifying words for "preaching"—Evangelistic *or* Evangelical. Our subject is "Evangel-

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ical Preaching". Evangelical is more comprehensive; is more definitely concerned with the substance of the message than with the manner of delivery; points more to the center of God's will, in the call, than to changing circumstances on the periphery; is more concerned with the "power of God" in the Gospel, than with the power of psychology in human emotions; and is more concerned with the vitalizing message of Gospel Theology than with the stimulating persuasiveness of the human messenger. However, though such a contrast between these two terms may be true to fact, it does not mean that they are contrary to each other; for it is a fact also that all evangelistic preaching, if entitled to that name, must be evangelical, at least in part, though it may not be wholly so, while all evangelical preaching must be evangelistic in the best sense of the word, and wholly so. This is true if the preacher is true to his call under the Great Commission. That involves no less than the sincerity, zeal, passion and devoted loyalty of a martyr. It is better to say "The Ministry of the Gospel" than to say "The Gospel Ministry."

Thus far, for a rather lengthy introduction, in which no little of the following discussion is anticipated. A subject as great and as vitally important as this one requires an extended treatise, or book, or course in a theological seminary, for anything like a satisfactory treatment.

With the purpose of this occasion in mind, no more can be done here than to present a brief, suggestive outline, with limited elaboration. Perhaps there is no better way to do that than through question and answer, and so we proceed.

1. Just What Is Evangelical Preaching?

Evangelical preaching is the preaching of the Gospel, the "good news" of God's purpose and plan to save men from the curse and power of sin. That is most certainly true, and yet, that answer is not quite as simple as it sounds. It involves at least two other most important questions: (1) What is PREACHING? and (2) What is the GOSPEL?

THE GOSPEL, in its inclusive sense, is the total revelation of God *to* the first Adam, *in* the second Adam, and all revelations between—in judgments, promises, pronouncements, poetry, prophecies, and providences; through patriarchs, judges, kings, prophets—but perfected in the incarnate Son of God—"God manifest in the flesh."

The Gospel, in its particular sense, is the good news of salvation, through the person, words, and works of Jesus

Christ, consummated in His atoning death and in His resurrection and ascension. The Gospel, in both senses, is epitomized in the words of Jesus Himself, recorded in John 3:16.

The Gospel, as the total revelation of God, is a perfect unity, in which no part is in apposition (certainly not opposition or even contrast) to, in, or separateness from, any other part. Never may that unity be disregarded in the interpretation of any particular part. The proof of this necessity is found in the example of Jesus in His use of the "Scriptures" (the Old Testament) in all of His teachings. This appears most significantly in the "Sermon on the Mount". Even the Law is Gospel, when its real meaning is revealed by "the Light of the World."

The inclusive Gospel, the total revelation of God, contains such an abundance of messages of infinite importance, direct from God, that he who is faithful to the call to preach the Gospel does not need, or wish, or dare to look for any other. God has made no mistakes in His revelations. He has omitted nothing essential to His gracious purpose, and has included nothing that is non-essential. Even the formation of the Canon, for the collection of inspired writings, as the record of His total revelation for one book, the Bible, was under God's providence. Any attempt by any man to make additions, or amendments, or omissions, is blasphemous presumption. God's call to men is to preach the Gospel, the whole Gospel, and nothing but the Gospel. St. Paul did not say, "Woe to me if I preach not," but, "Woe to me if I preach not the Gospel." Concerning his central theme he said to the Corinthians: "I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified."

Preaching is, primarily, the public proclamation of a personal message from God, recorded in the inspired Scriptures, for all mankind, and for every individual of every generation.

The message which the preacher is called to proclaim always comes in the form of a passage of Scripture. The text not only contains the message, but it is the message. The evangelical preacher never has a message of his own. So, if the preacher is to deliver an evangelacal sermon, instead of a semi-secular address, the proclamation of the message from heaven will come first—not merely in an order of procedure, but in the order of importance. That message should be proclaimed for what it is, and not as a formal announcement read

in a lifeless manner. If this is contrary to present popular practice, let it be so. It stands.

But under the Great Commission, teaching (interpretation) must go with the proclamation of the Gospel. That becomes the body of the sermon. If true to the message, that teaching, as the term is used in the Scripture, is doctrine. With knowledge of the unpopularity of labeled "doctrinal sermons", we say that an evangelical sermon, as true to its Scripture message, must be a doctrinal sermon. If doctrinal sermons are unpopular, and are considered dull, dry, uninteresting, or "too deep", the fault is not in the Scripture message (God's message). Maybe it is in both the messenger and the hearer. On the part of the preacher the fault may be due to the lack of continuous, broad, basic and penetrative study prior to the preparation of any particular sermon; or to the lack of that clear understanding and appreciation of a particular message which would compel him to deliver it with the conviction and zeal of a witness; not in the tiresome repetition of lifeless platitudes, or in the use of technical terms which are not in the vocabulary of the average hearer. If his thought is clear, his language plain, and his purpose sincere, and worthy of his call, the doctrine he presents will never be "deeper" than the will of God in His revelation.

The first audience for a sermon is the preacher himself. If the message brings conviction to his heart it will not be dull in its delivery, and it will be doctrinal in substance.

Luther's sermons are strikingly up-to-date now, and are timeless in the challenge to interest, because they are doctrinal interpretations of the Scriptures. He was as zealous for interpretation in the language of the plain people as for such a translation of the Scriptures themselves.

The time and work required for such preaching, in response to God's call itself, as a matter of conscience, must be given undisputed priority in the practice of the stewardship of both time and energy. The evangelical preacher should restudy the letters of St. Paul to Timothy and Titus at least once a month for what they say concerning personal life and service, but should always give special attention to what he says about doctrine.

On the part of hearers, the unpopularity of doctrinal sermons may be ascribed to many things; for instance, a thoughtless, cumulative, hearsay prejudice against the term "doctrine"; inexperience in attentive mental reception; lack of habit of thinking; maybe unwillingness to take blame for a

delinquency; lack of basic instruction; absence of conviction concerning the value of revealed truth, etc., etc. The stock "excuse" for any, or all, of these delinquencies is: "Too deep."

People freely travel long distances, gladly pay fees for the use of glass-bottom boats and the services of pilots, and spend time and energy, as well as money, to see the wonders of Crystal Springs. They feel that the sight of those wonders is worth more than the cost, but find a thrilling delight also in the mere penetration of those depths by the power of the eye. They indeed wonder at the depths and beauties, but they do not say "too deep". They are eager to look deeper and deeper.

This could be thought of as a parable, for both preachers and people, if one thought of God's revelation as a crystal spring of truth. As applied to preachers, it would mean that, as those in the service of seekers after the truth of revelation, they would be supremely concerned that all seekers for the truth "as it is in Jesus" would find it with its wonders, as revealed by God. Without being too particular about this figure of speech, they, as Trustees, with the "glorious Gospel" in trust, will do their utmost to prevent any foreign element from dimming the light by which, or the medium through which, revealed truth, in its perfection, unity, purity, beauty, and wonders, is to be seen. As *stewards,* they will guard against unfriendly intruders, and encourage all honest seekers. As *servants,* they will tolerate no obstructions, and will keep the glass in their boats clean and transparent. As *pilots,* they will follow the evangelical chart with precision. As *guides,* they will point to the wonders where they are, without omission, and explain them as they are, without the uncertainties of skepticism or the fabrications of imagination. They will neither be diverted by the cloudy shadows of rationalistic philosophy, nor confused by the foggy atmosphere of secular science. As trained and trusted Conductors, under a distinct and explicit commission to show seekers after saving truth, where, and where alone, and how alone it can be found, they will do nothing that would divert attention from the purpose of the quest, by relating striking human-interest stories or pointing to flaming flowers, or to floating clouds, or commenting on the behavior of people on the distant shore, or on circumstantial incidents. Their commission demands concentration by its supreme importance.

With this extended answer to the first, and most important, question, other pertinent questions may be answered very briefly.

2. Why Such Absolute Emphasis upon Evangelical Preaching?

(1) Because it is the will of God, clearly, definitely, and graciously expressed.

(2) Because the purpose, provisions and plans of God, for the salvation of man, as defined in the Gospel, are perfect and adequate, nothing to be added and nothing to be omitted.

(3) Because God has not called or commissioned men to preach or teach anything else than the Gospel, interpreted and applied with its own plain implications, and wholly without extraneous and arbitrary imputations.

(4) Because the Gospel of Christ is the power of God unto salvation. In it, by His own personal, real presence, God bestows faith, forgiveness, regeneration and grace for the new life. It is not a message from an absentee God, but God Himself is in it, though He uses human language and voice for its delivery to men. By Him the person is spiritually transformed to a new life, not just reformed to conform to a better outer practice. God communicates the power of His own dynamic attributes of perfection, which mold and motivate that character which manifests itself in conduct in all of the relations of daily life. There the Gospel becomes the effective, and the only effective, solution of social problems. Mass movements, motivated by regard for circumstantial expediency, often ease tensions for a while but do not change basic morals, as does the conscientious practice of righteous principles, communicated by God in the Gospel.

In all of this, whenever we speak of God we mean, of course, the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

(5) Because by the Gospel the life of the Christian, using the profound and inspired words of St. Paul, "is hid with Christ in God."

(6) Because evangelical preaching and teaching is the only way to meet a deadly heresy which is all too common among confessing Christians in all denominations, namely, that they hope to get to heaven because they are doing (emphasis on "doing") the best they can, excusing their failures, or, that it does not matter much what one believes, just so he tries to live right—salvation by good works instead of by grace, or salvation through grace and good works instead of by grace alone. This blas-

phemous teaching by false prophets in sheep's clothing can be confuted by the Gospel only.

Now, grouping several questions, we ask . . .

3. Where, When, to Whom, and How, Is Evangelical Preaching to Be Done?

Everywhere, at any time, to whomsoever will give attention, according to the nature of the call. The where and when are, to some extent, matters of circumstance, but not for regular preaching by appointment, in connection with public worship. There preaching is given a place, with purpose, in the order of the public service. At that place and time evangelical preaching is the only kind of preaching allowed by the purpose defined in God's call. The public discussion of distinctly temporal, or secular subjects—social, economic, political, or moral —are certainly important and appropriate, from platforms and before various public assemblies. There preachers may be of great service, but such discussions as involve mere human opinion or pronouncements on current temporal issues are out of place in a pulpit. An addres is not a sermon, though it have a robe behind it and a prayer after it.

As to the "how" of evangelical preaching, let it be said that it cannot be done too well, but it will not be done well at all if more care be given to the techniques of preaching, as a profession, than to the spirit of the preacher, as a messenger from God. The human elements become conspicuous in the delivery of His message. These elements are in two classes, the inner and the outer. In the outer there is good reason to give attention to certain techniques. In the inner there are two things that require special consideration—conscience and consciousness. These two act and react powerfully upon each other, in relation to both purpose and motive. Conscience determines sincerity and loyalty to the commission to deliver God's message, and consciousness, of the right sort, begets the manifestation of the fervor and conviction of the witness to the truth of the message. Consciousness "of the right sort" must include at least these four things:

(1) Consciousness of the personal presence of the Lord who hears the delivery of His message.

(2) Consciousness of the import of the message, with conviction that it is true, and appreciation of its importance to meet the needs of those present, as God sees them.

(3) Consciousness of self, as God's messenger, charged with responsibility to choose, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a message from God's revelations, recorded in the Scriptures, and to deliver the same in His name and by His grace, in language that makes the meaning clear to those who hear.

(4) Consciousness of the people assembled, whose needs God knows, and with infinite love wills to meet. Some of them, maybe, were never present before, and some, maybe, will never be present again. For some it may be a first chance, and for some a last chance for such a message from the Lord.

These are sobering matters for consciousness, but not depressing. Through Evangelical preaching God is in the sin-cursed world seeking to rescue immortal souls from the tragedy of eternal death.

Concerning the technique of evangelical preaching, much has been said by others, and more about "preaching" than about evangelical preaching, which may be significant. Technique is important, but its importance is relative, as that of means to an end. Nothing is more dramatic than the personal presence of God with the good news of salvation for lost souls and divine assurance for the saved.

With the consciousness above indicated, the proprieties in delivery of the God-given message ought to come naturally, but not without attention. There is no justification for any superficiality, and it is almost shocking to speak of "the art of preaching." That belongs to the professionals. Preaching is not a profession.

Language should be chaste and simple. Manners should be reverent and sincere. All talents, of mind, speech, and personality, should be used fully, but for the glory of God, not the glory of the preacher. The importance of the messenger must never detract from the importance of the message. The "art of preaching" may encourage many to go to hear a man, instead of God's messenger.

In the explanation of a message from the Scriptures it is desirable and proper to use illustrations from everyday life, but, when used, illustrations should be after the pattern of the parables of Jesus and the figures of speech used by St. Paul, lest the illustration should command greater attention than the truth it is intended to illustrate.

The preacher must have faith in the power of the glorious Gospel committed to his trust, but must remember also that "it is required of a steward that he be found faithful to his trust."

Since the day of St. Paul no greater example of the evangelical preacher has appeared than that of Luther. When one thinks of Luther he does not think of him distinctively as a great theologian, or a great writer, or even as a great preacher and teacher, though he was all of that and more, but thinks of him preeminently as an evangelical witness.

As to the question: To whom should evangelical preaching be directed?, at least certain important things must be said. The doors of the church are open. A public announcement of the occasion has been made. The invitation, "Whosoever will, let him come," has been issued. The preacher never knows who will respond. Even though there may be only one present who has not accepted the Gospel, the sermon should be such a convincing proclamation of the Gospel that only a hardened heart could resist it. Because of the likelihood that unconverted persons may be present, it never seems quite right for the preacher to address those present as "my Christian friends." If done sincerely, and not just perfunctorily, it is better to say, "beloved in the Lord," including both believers and unbelievers. Furthermore, since evangelization, bringing one completely under the power of the Gospel, to perfect sanctification, is never finished in a single person, everyone, in every congregation, including the preacher himself, needs nothing less, and should have nothing more, than evangelical preaching. We dare not forget the two-fold mission in evangelical preaching, to be included in every sermon—the conversion of unbelievers, and the edification of believers, and that neither mission is fulfilled without the other. It is the Gospel which leads men to faith, and it is by the Gospel that believers "grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord, Jesus Christ." Men are not called to "bring souls to Christ," but to bring Christ to souls, through the Gospel.

4. How Effective Is Evangelical Preaching?

Who can answer the question? It is a natural question, on the human side. What preacher has not asked it, either out of the desire for the glory of God, or out of concern for his own glory? God alone knows the answer, in terms of the invisible and spiritual, and the measurement of the visible, in the worldly terms of "success", is unreliable and deceptive. If the answer is seen in the "crowds" who attend, it may mean that

the sermons are more entertaining than evangelical. If seen in the few present, it may be that the sermons are evangelical in content and dull in delivery. In neither case is the answer given to the question of the effectiveness of evangelical preaching. If the preacher seeks the answer to the question by the comments at the front door of the church after the service, he may be flattered by those who say much and mean little, or discouraged by those who say little and mean much. The real answer is hidden from men, in the hearts of individual hearers. Many a preacher of long service has had gladdening surprise by someone telling him that, many years before, he said a thing which remained in that one's heart and had changed his whole subsequent life. Someone has given three things by which he appraised the evangelical character of a sermon for himself. Here they are, in question form:

(1) What was there in that sermon that would make me want to be a Christian, if I were not one?

(2) What was there in it that makes me want to be a better Christian?

(3) What was there in it that would help me to become a Christian, or to become a better one?

* * *

Now in conclusion; I have come to you with the understanding that these morning sessions are intended to be inspirational. I have known that I could not inspire you, for only the Holy Spirit inspires men with living truth, and that the most I could do was to add some stimulation by bearing witness to the truth by which the Holy Spirit inspires.

If interest in evangelism is to continue and grow in our congregations it must be by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit who wills to bring that inspiration to us continuously through evangelical preaching.

You may say—"There is nothing new in all that has been said." I hope that if you say that you state the fact. I would be frightened if that could not be said. The Gospel is called "the old, old story", and yet, unchanging, in its repetition it is ever new and renewing, for it is "the power of God unto salvation."

If what I have said is not true, then pray to God to forgive me, and to help you to forget. If it is true, then thank God, not me, and pray for knowledge, grace, and zeal for effective evangelical preaching.

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